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Coming into Being: J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man* and the Aesthetic of Hospitality

While much of his critical work on J. M. Coetzee's writing is informed by a sophisticated understanding of Derridean hospitality, Derek Attridge has seldom used this term himself—the exception being his insightful reading of *The Master of Petersburg* (*J. M. Coetzee* 122–24). In fact, very little criticism to date has examined Coetzee's use of the metaphor of hospitality in his writing. Focusing principally on *Age of Iron*, I briefly explore, in the first part of this essay, the incidence of this trope in this writer's earlier fiction. Thereafter, I trace his deployment of the language of hospitality in *Slow Man*, arguing that this metaphorical vocabulary inscribes a disjunction between the novel's medium and the kind of hospitality of which it attempts to speak. Coetzee's use of the trope of hospitality, I contend, in fact stages language's inability to achieve what this metaphor insists it must achieve. Although I do consider some of the points of intersection between his engagement with the idea of hospitality and that of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, my purpose is not to speculate on Coetzee's philosophical allegiances but to consider his understanding of the implications of the ethic of hospitality for the writing and reading of narrative fiction.

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Coetzee's concern with hospitality is evident in his extensive use in his fiction of the trope of the arrival of the stranger who precipitates change in the host who receives her. One thinks here of the medical officer's reception of Michael K in *Life & Times of Michael K*, part of which, similarly to *Slow Man*, is set in a hospital of sorts. Another example would be Mrs. Curren's response to Vercueil who, in the opening chapter of *Age of Iron*, arrives unannounced outside her house. Throughout this latter novel, Mrs. Curren associates Vercueil with an angel, and his visit, accordingly, evokes the Pauline injunction to hospitality: "Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb. 13.2). In fact, in this work, Coetzee draws on Leo Tolstoy's "What Men Live By," a story about a poor shoemaker who provides sustenance to a naked stranger who turns out to be an angel.[1] In Tolstoy's story, the angel's encounter with the shoemaker teaches him that "though it seems to men that they live by care for themselves, in truth it is love alone by which they live" (81). The allusions to this short story in Coetzee's novel establish a contrast between Tolstoy's shoemaker's selfless generosity and Mrs. Curren's grudging charity in their respective encounters with a stranger. In her dealings with Vercueil, Mrs. Curren seems unable to love and care unconditionally. Unlike the house in Tolstoy's story, which "tremble[s]...with angelic chanting" (Coetzee, *Age of Iron* 13), Mrs. Curren's is without love.

Here, already, it is clear that *Age of Iron* points to a form of love or care that surpasses the self's concern with itself. Tellingly, in this regard, Coetzee's subsequent development of Mrs. Curren's relationship with Vercueil suggests that, despite her various reservations about him and the degree to which they limit her generosity (see, for example, page 17), she is in fact deeply affected and therefore changed by her encounter with him. While her initial hospitality may be conditional, it becomes unconditional.

Before I pursue this discussion of the nature of the change that Mrs. Curren undergoes as a result of her contact with Vercueil, it is necessary briefly to adumbrate Derrida's distinction, already

1. See also Dostoevsky's resolution in Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*: "Let the angel come knocking at my door ... and I will not fail, I will give him shelter" (92).

evident in Levinas's ethics, between conditional and unconditional hospitality. At stake here are the ethical implications of the ways in which the subject constructs itself in relation to other identities. The distinction is between a form of subjectivity constituted through a hostile process of inclusion and exclusion and one that comes into being in the self's pre-reflective and traumatic exposure, without inhibition, to otherness. In Derrida's argument, conditional hospitality involves extending an invitation to a guest who is thus named and identified in advance (*Of Hospitality* 25*ff*.). A host expects and therefore knows his guest prior to his arrival. This form of hospitality, which emanates from the sets of expectations attendant on the self's location in a cultural domain, consequently precludes the possibility of being surprised by the strangeness of a visitor. In fact, such hospitality involves the host in an elaborate process of self-consolidation, of fortifying the home against the danger of difference. After all, as Derrida points out, a host, in inviting and thereby naming a guest, exercizes the right and power to choose, select, filter, and thereby exclude (*Of Hospitality* 55). He engages in an exclusionary process of self-affirmation that not only shields him from the strangeness of others but also, through placing them at a distance, enables ethical indifference. It is to this process of self-consolidation that Levinas refers when he maintains, "To take hold of oneself for a present of welcome is already to take one's distance, and miss the neighbor" (88).

Conversely, unconditional hospitality is distinguished by responsiveness to otherness. In Derrida's account, it denotes a receiving of difference "before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*" (*Of Hospitality* 77). Since the arrival of the stranger or other is unannounced and wholly unexpected, she cannot be known in advance from within a priorly formed system of linguistic conceptuality. In not being able to name, to grasp in language, the stranger, the host loses her sovereignty over and distance from this visitor.[2] This is why the "stranger," for Levinas, is also a "neighbor" (12, 87, 88, 166). The host is opened up to and invaded

2. For Derrida, the "guest" is expected, whereas the "visitor" is unexpected (*Of Hospitality* 77).

by the visitor's difference or otherness. Because the visitor does not "knock," as Levinas puts it, he "assigns me before I designate him" (87), and this "assignation is entry into me by burglary" (145). In arriving uninvited, the visitor unsettles and unhomes the host. In the process, ethical indifference becomes impossible: the host is the other's home. Nevertheless, this generous act is not an action which the host undertakes as an agent: she only gives herself to the stranger through being invaded, possessed and dispossessed of self by her. In other words, her generosity is concomitant with a loss of the ability to give. Unconditional hospitality is an effect of the host being taken "hostage" by the visitor. The host becomes a *hostis*, that is, a stranger, unto herself. Accordingly, the change that she undergoes is involuntary. In both Derrida's and Levinas's accounts, then, unconditional hospitality marks a shift from ethical philosophy's focus on a self who actively and consciously comprehends the experiences of others in terms of a priorly formed conceptual system to the pre-reflective effect of others on that self.

In Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, the metaphoric link between Mrs. Curren and her house, which was built "without love" and, like her, is "cold, inert now, ready to die" (13), enables an allegory of just such a form of unconditional hospitality. After Mrs. Curren returns home from a visit to the hospital, Vercueil follows her into her house "Uninvited" (74), an action whose symbolic importance is again stressed in Mrs. Curren's later description of Vercueil as "A man who came without being invited" (165). The association, here, of the uninvited entry of the house with the opening up of the self to the otherness of the other person is made clear by the sexual innuendo in Mrs. Curren's reflection on watching Vercueil eat the bread she has given him: "My mind like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs. Without that finger stillness, stagnation.... His dirty fingernail entering me" (74).

The suggestion is that Mrs. Curren is invaded and possessed by Vercueil's otherness and, in the process, dispossessed of self. It is this forfeiture or surrender of self that allows her to love generously, that is, without concern for self. As is implicit in the words she writes to her daughter, her experience with Vercueil involves a form of *ek-stasis*: "Letting go of myself, letting go of you, letting go of a house still alive with memories: a hard task, but I am learning" (119). The involuntary sacrifice of self enables unconditional love, as Mrs. Curren begins to realize in her reflection on the fact that she must love the character John precisely because *she* finds him unlovable: "I must love, first of all, the unlovable.... I must love him. But I do not love him. Nor do I want to love him enough to love him despite myself" (125).[3]

The important point, here, is not simply that Mrs. Curren changes, but that the change she undergoes is unbidden. Far from being the result of a rational decision, her concern for Vercueil, and ultimately John, is quite involuntary. In *Disgrace*, the involuntary, indeed pre-reflective, nature of such change is staged in David Lurie's inability to explain the responsibility that he comes to feel for other beings. We read that "He does not understand what is happening to him" (143), and that he finds it "Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs" (146). He is equally bemused, even surprised, by his inexplicable, irrational concern for the sheep that Petrus intends to slaughter: "A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how.... Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (126). The simple grammatical fact that "A bond," rather than Lurie or the Persians, is the agent in the first of these sentences indicates that Lurie's sense of responsibility for the sheep is not a willed action.[4] On the contrary, his concern arises from an ecstatic surrender of self and therefore of the ability to choose. To the extent that he does, he changes despite himself.

In *Slow Man*, this focus on the unannounced visitor and the unwilled change that he may precipitate in the unwilling host is more apparent than in any of the previous novels. Much of the narrative consists of the forms of hospitality that Paul Rayment extends to various guests and visitors, both invited and uninvited: for example,

3. In a very similar context, that is, one in which he outlines his notion of self-sacrificing responsibility, Levinas describes the "passivity" of the responsible subject as follows: "It is an offering oneself which is not even assumed by its own generosity, an offering oneself that is a suffering, a goodness despite oneself" (54; see also 50, 51, 57, 141).

4. Coetzee's fascination with such constructions emerges clearly in "The Agentless Sentence."

Marijana Jokić, Margaret McCord, Elizabeth Costello, Marianna, Drago Jokić. In their turn, these visits are framed by the hospitality that he receives from the hospital and the Jokić family.

Following the accident on Magill Road, Paul Rayment experiences the institutionalized hospitality of the hospital and various professional caregivers—what he refers to as a "regimen of care" (32). In turn, this calculated practice of care is offset by the unconditional care that *he* comes to feel for one of these caregivers, Marijana Jokić. She, we read, "come[s] into his life" (33), the implication being that she arrives uninvited. The accidental nature of the change that Rayment undergoes following this visitation is clearly delineated in the novel. Initially, he is depicted as a man who believes that reason provides him with the ability to control himself. In terms of his reflection on the Platonic image of the self as charioteer, "gripping the reins" of "a black steed with flashing eyes and distended nostrils representing the base appetites, and a white steed of calmer mien representing the less easily identifiable nobler passions" (53), he relies on reason to invest him with agency, the ability to harness the "base appetites." So, for instance, he has "never been fond of immoderacy, immodesty, wild motions, grunts and shouts and cries" (109). "[P]assionate outpourings," he confesses, "are not part of his nature" (45). His "tortoise variety of passion" (228) or, in Elizabeth Costello's words, "aversion to the physical" (234), stems from his fear of losing control over himself. In his own estimation, what Margaret McCord and "half a dozen other women" will "recall about him" is not passion, which to him is "foreign territory," but a "mild and gratifying sensuality" (45). He disapproves of being caught in the "grip of passion" (46), of orgasm, the "little death" which serves as a prelude to death by ecstatically relieving the self of control of itself.

Soon after the arrival of Marijana Jokić, all of this changes. A clearly bewildered Paul Rayment finds himself wondering at his reckless desire to offer himself to a stranger: "*Who is this woman,* he thinks, *to whom I yearn to give myself? A mystery, all a mystery*" (127). The measure of the transformation that he has undergone is exactly his surprise at himself—the implication being that he has become strange, a stranger, unto himself. What this indicates, in turn, is that he has changed despite himself.

The unconscious nature of this change is emphasized throughout the novel. After the accident, Margaret McCord comforts Rayment with the words, "You are still yourself" (38). Later, he himself reflects, "He is trapped with the same old self as before" (54), a sentiment that echoes Dostoevsky's despairing sense, in Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg*, that he is "manacled to [him]self till the day [he] die[s]" (82). The point, here, is not simply that Rayment is changing even as, quite ironically, he reflects on his apparent inability to do so. By routinely foreclosing on alterity, this writer implies, a controlling subjectivity grounded in reason actively resists change. The vigor, power, and control of ratiocinative consciousness protects the self from change and, in the process, enthralls it to itself. In terms of the trope of hospitality, the host is imprisoned in her home.

In a closely related context, Derrida muses on just this point: "it's *as if* the master, *qua* master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity" (*Of Hospitality* 123). Earlier still, Levinas, in referring to the self's sacrifice, or substitution, of itself for the other person, says much the same: "Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself" (124). This description adds yet another metaphor to the already imbricated figure of hospitality by suggesting that the visitor is a breath of air. If the self "suffocates in itself," the advent of the other is inspiration. Hence Levinas refers to the "wind of alterity" and describes "Freedom" as "animation itself, breath, the breathing of outside air, where inwardness frees itself from itself, and is exposed to all the winds" (180). To open oneself to the other is "to free oneself by breathing from closure in oneself." Cumulatively, these metaphors depict the surprising yet unobtrusive change wrought by the uninvited visitor on the host in terms of liberation and animation. The visitor is not only a "liberator" and "emancipator," as Derrida contends (*Of Hospitality* 123), but also (and this bears comparison with Coetzee's biblical vocabulary in *Slow Man*, *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *Disgrace*) a savior and life-giver.

Paradoxically, then, Paul Rayment, in sacrificing himself to Marijana Jokić, saves himself. He saves himself by becoming other than himself. When he visits the Jokić family in the penultimate scene of the novel and Elizabeth Costello comforts him with the words, "I'm sure it will take you out of yourself" (241), what is being suggested is that, given the self's imprisonment by its subjectivity, the enabling condition for change is *ek-stasis*. One can save oneself only through an act of unconditional hospitality, that is, by forfeiting oneself through offering oneself to the unexpected visitor. In Derrida's terms, such "gracious" hospitality is "beyond debt and economy" (*Of Hospitality* 83)—it expects nothing in return.

Grounded as it is in a *Bildung* that tends toward a loss, rather than consolidation, of self, the trajectory of *Slow Man* is consequently fairly similar to that of *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*. In *Slow Man*, though, this movement is complicated by the arrival of Elizabeth Costello in chapter 13, which extends the novel's debate on hospitality from the presentational surface of the narrative to a self-reflexive level involving the relationship between author and character and, ultimately, text and reader.[5] Costello's recitation of the opening sentences of the novel dealing with Rayment's accident requires us to reread this passage as an allegory of the accident of inspiration, of the writer's loss of control in the moment of writing. That is, the repetition of the passage makes us aware that when we read of "something coming" to Rayment, we are also reading of Rayment happening to Elizabeth Costello. Indeed, the presence of the typewriter in this description indicates that Rayment's sense of his ontogenesis is his visitation of Costello, his unannounced arrival or "coming" to her: "Something is coming to him. A letter at a time, *clack clack clack*, a message is being typed on a rose-pink screen that trembles like water each time he blinks and is therefore quite likely his own inner eyelid" (3). Importantly, Costello later describes having *heard* the opening words of the novel. By implication, they "come" to her; she receives these words, which is to say Paul Rayment, from an unknown source. As her reference to Marianna intimates, they are a command issued from a source that is wholly other: " 'She came to me as you came to me,' says Costello. 'A woman of darkness, a woman in darkness. *Take up the story of such a one*: words in my sleeping ear, spoken by what in the old days we would have called an angel calling me out to a wrestling match' " (115).

5. See John Fowles's authorial intrusion in chapter 13 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (85–88). Obviously, the "Fowles" that one encounters in this chapter is, like Elizabeth Costello in *Slow Man*, an author figure, that is, a character.

This description of inspiration foregrounds the extreme passivity of the self in the moment of inspiration. In this regard, the metaphor of the "sleeping ear," which implies a contrast with a wakeful and masterful eye, connotes a pre-reflective state of openness to an alterity that would be foreclosed upon and possessed by subject-centered consciousness. It is just such a state receptive to otherness that Maurice Blanchot, alluding to Levinas's discussions of the self's passivity upon being exposed to the otherness of the human Other, refers to as "attentionality," as opposed to projective intentionality, a waiting without expectation or intention for the command of the Other (*Infinite Conversation* 53). Indeed, for Levinas, this opening out of subjectivity to otherness takes place in an "instant," or *Augenblick*, that interrupts temporal experience.[6] During the *Augenblick*, the eye "listens" (30, 37, 38), or as John Llewelyn puts it, "opening one's eyes is called to make way for opening one's ears" (55).

What is remarkable about Elizabeth Costello's description, then, is that it figures inspiration as a process through which the writing subject is subordinated to an unknown authority. The reference to the "sleeping ear," to a passive form of hearing, emphasizes the obedience of the self under inspiration. Indeed, the very word *obey* is etymologically related to *audire*, "to hear" ("Obey"). To be inspired is to be mastered, to respond unquestioningly to an order received from a wholly unknown and unknowable source. In the passage, the alterity of this source is stressed through its association with the face of the Judeo-Christian God. It is Jacob who wrestles with an angel and thereafter, relieved at having survived seeing God "face to face," names the place where the bout occurred *Peniel*, which means "face of God" (Gen. 32:30).

It follows that inspiration cannot be invited. When it arrives, it does so unannounced, by infiltrating the individual's consciousness and possessing her. In terms of the metaphor of hospitality, the writer could be described as becoming host to an unknown and

6. It should be noted that this "lapse of time" (Levinas 38), or discontinuity, is entirely nonphenomenological in that it does not form part of a retentional past or a present from which the future may be anticipated. Hence Levinas refers to "the diachrony of the instant" (49; see also 38, 50). The *Augenblick* is "something irrecuperable, refractory to the simultaneity of the present, something unrepresentable, immemorial, prehistorical" (38).

unknowable visitor. However, the host is not sovereign in this relationship: she is invaded and taken hostage by the unannounced visitor and, in the process, dispossessed of self-possession. To respond obediently to inspiration in the way described by Costello is thus to give oneself up to that inspiration. It is to write, and therefore to act, while being acted upon by an unknown authority.[7] It is to write despite oneself.

Paul Rayment is accordingly only partly correct in assuming that he has been mastered by Elizabeth Costello's authorial authority (164). While it is true that he, in terms of the novel's self-reflexive illusion, depends on her authorship for his being as a character, the text makes it quite clear that she is equally dependent on him.[8] She "follows" him throughout, a state of servitude that becomes apparent in her remarks that she "must wait upon" him (136), and that "His is the power of leading" and hers of "following" (233). As she puts it elsewhere, he is the "penance" that she is "sentenced to speak" (162). Costello depends on Rayment because he is the means through which she must obey the command received in her "sleeping ear." That is, he is quite literally the "sentence," the medium and

7. My discussion draws on Derek Attridge's fine account of literature as event. Artistic creation, for Attridge, is "both an act and an event, both something that is done intentionally by an effort of the will and something that happens without warning to a passive, though alert, consciousness" (*Singularity* 26). See also Levinas's description of the passivity to which the self is reduced in its encounter with the alterity, or face, of the human Other. For Levinas, passivity involves not inaction but responsiveness and obedience to the Other. It is in making this point that he uses the air metaphor discussed above. The self is a "lung" opened to "invisible air" which, although "hidden from perception," "penetrate[es]" and "obsesses" the individual (180). Such inspiration, Levinas argues, is profoundly ambiguous: it confronts "me" with the "possibility of being the author of what had been breathed in unbeknownst to me, of having received, one knows not from where, that of which I am author" (148–49). Despite his skepticism toward art, Levinas's ethic is thus an aesthetic of sorts: the self acts, which is to say creates, in being acted upon. (In the context of artistic inspiration, this understanding of passivity translates into the notion of the writer, in Elizabeth Costello's description, as a "secretary of the invisible" [Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 199].) The Levinasian notion of an ethical agency grounded in passivity is sometimes misunderstood by commentators on Coetzee's writing. Elleke Boehmer, for instance, seems to equate passivity with inaction, indeed "suffering in silence," in her discussion of Lucy Lurie's "secular scapegoat status" in Coetzee's *Disgrace* (146).

8. For a similar argument on the author–character relationship, see Gareth Cornwell's discussion of Coetzee's "He and His Man."

form through which she gives herself up to the alterior source of her inspiration. He, which is to say the language and form of the novel-as-genre, must embody her gift of self and thereby instantiate her unconditional love. It is for this reason that Costello is often depicted as being incorporeal, an insubstantial, even spectral, presence. Rayment, for instance, reflects on her "blankness" (120) and "finds her so colourless, so featureless" (160). He—the medium and form of the novel—must invest her with substance.

Can this be done? For both Levinas and Derrida, absolute hospitality simply cannot be thematized. As I have already indicated, the unexpected visitor cannot be named and therefore grasped in language. The kind of relationship at stake in unconditional hospitality is neither cognitive nor conceptual. Coetzee's novel, though, is wholly ambivalent on the issue of whether or not language can accommodate the writer's self-sacrificing generosity. So, for example, Costello complains to Rayment about the text's lackluster description of his discovery of her by the riverside, feeding ducks: "[I]t is not good enough. It does not bring me to life. Bringing me to life may not be important to you, but it has the drawback of not bringing you to life either" (159). At this stage in the novel, Rayment fails to perform the task he has been assigned. Later, though, in the penultimate scene, in which he and Costello pay an "unannounced visit" to the Jokić family (239), she enthuses at the animate nature of the text's descriptions: "So real!... Who would have thought it!" (242). Significantly, Rayment notices that she "is leaning back, eyes shut, abstracted" (247). The implication is clear: she is writing under inspiration, and he is investing her gift of self with form and substance. On the final page of the novel, when he "takes a good look at her," she is no longer "blank," "colourless" and "featureless": "In the clear late-afternoon light he can see every detail, every hair, every vein" (263).

Nevertheless, *Slow Man* undermines the possibility of thematizing unconditional hospitality, even as it raises it. Thus, for example, Rayment's scrutiny of Costello's physiognomy coincides with a disavowal of love in his response to her questions "Is this love, Paul? Have we found love at last?": "No...this is not love. This is something else. Something less" (263). Costello's reply to this response, "And is that your last word, do you think?" (263), renders radically ambivalent the novel's view on whether language, and therefore the novel itself, is able to represent absolute hospitality. It qualifies the suggestion (with which it nevertheless coexists) that love may be represented by pointing to the fact that language is, at the very best, singularly ill-equipped to perform this task. While the writer under inspiration cannot but give himself up, language, the means through which he is to do so, may not be able to accommodate the gift of self. In fact, the medium and form of the novel could well treacherously negate this enactment of love.

Slow Man is consequently deeply skeptical of language's ability to do what it is tasked with. In fact, this skepticism, which modulates into anxiety about whether or not it can come into being as the writer's gift of self, is one of the novel's prominent motifs. Rayment reflects that the language he speaks "does not come from my core" (198). Instead of coming "[f]rom the heart" (231), which is earlier described as the seat, or indeed home, of love, the place where it "takes up residence" (149), his words come from the "word-box" that he carries around in place of a heart (230, 234). The implication, further evident in Elizabeth Costello's contention that English is part of his "tortoise-shell armor" (230), is that this character's emotional torpor, his "slowness," is not an individual idiosyncrasy but a function of language. Paul Rayment, it seems, is a "slow man" because he is words, language. The novel's title points not so much to his physical or emotional inadequacies (or, for that matter, to those of Elizabeth Costello, who, we are frequently told, has a heart condition [80, 82, 198]), as to the hostility of language to unconditional hospitality. By extension, this title signifies the novel's difficulty in accomplishing the task to which it has been assigned. The work announces that, although a product of love, it may well be the loss of that which has produced it. In talking of love, then, it talks of that which it possibly negates.

This preoccupation with language's potential betrayal of love is a feature of much of Coetzee's writing. For example, in *The Master of Petersburg*, it is again evident in the motif of slowness. The character Dostoevsky, who tries to establish contact with the dead Pavel, reflects that he is "called to be" a "Poet, lyre-player, enchanter, lord of resurrection," whose responsibility it is "to gather the hoard, put together the scattered parts" (152). It is he, according to Anna Sergeyevna, who must "bring" Pavel "back to life" (140), invest him with form and substance. Unlike Orpheus, though, who through the lyre's music of love charms the gods of the underworld and extracts from them the concession of the averted gaze that enables him to approach Eurydice (Ovid 234–35), Dostoevsky must use language in his bid to resurrect Pavel (5).[9] Significantly, he questions his characterization as a lyre player, a lord of resurrection, with the following words: "And the truth? Stiff shoulders humped over the writing table, and the ache of a heart slow to move. A tortoise heart" (152–53). The tortoise, whose Greek name, *chelys*, also signifies "lyre" (Baines 1106), and whose shell is thought to have once been used for the sound-box of the lyre, is here associated with writing and a stunted ability to love. When Dostoevsky, in his dreams, descends into the underworld and reestablishes contact with Pavel, it is in the form of a turtle in a watery realm which is, of course, antipathetic to language: "From his turtle-throat he gives a last cry, which seems to him more like a bark, and plunges toward the boy. He wants to kiss the face; but when he touches his hard lips to it, he is not sure he is not biting" (18).

Instead of accomplishing what the writer desires it to accomplish, language, then, could very well betray this desire. If anything, the recognition of this aporia is even stronger in *Slow Man* than it is in *The Master of Petersburg*. In fact, the later novel's ontogenetic anxiety manifests itself in its parody of its own attempt to thematize unconditional hospitality. In this regard, the contrived nature of the novel's presentation of the narrative of Paul Rayment's *Bildung* is significant. The text does not present itself as Paul Rayment's growth to love, but as a *literary* representation of such a development. Through its sheer artificiality, contrivance, and stylized nature, this representation parodies itself and therefore Rayment's progression from "slow man" to "rocket man" (258).[10] In the process, Coetzee foregrounds the text's separation

9. Coetzee's invocation of the Orpheus myth in the context of literary inspiration and representation invites comparison with Maurice Blanchot's "Orpheus' Gaze," an essay in which the same myth is used as an allegory of the aporetic nature of literary representation, the fact that literary form negates that which it seeks to present.

10. In the context of Coetzee's oeuvre, the coyness of *Slow Man* is quite unprecedented. Self-reflexive jokes, such as Elizabeth Costello's assertion that she is able to "read" Rayment "like a book" (101), are frequent and constantly foreground the text's representational status. Similarly, the word "care," through deliberate overuse, becomes increasingly ambivalent and eventually signifies only the dissonance between itself and that which it claims to signify.

from that which it professes to "represent." As a representation, it is different from, separate to, that which it purports to present. It comes after, is the past of, that which it seeks to render present.[11]

Precisely this divorce is emphasized by the novel's self-reflexive depiction of Elizabeth Costello's inspiration, which, even as it claims to present the moment of the text's coming into being, exposes its exile from that moment by revealing itself to be merely a representation thereof. The work lays bare the ineluctable pastness of the event of its inspiration by presenting Costello as a surrogate author and thereby, in fact, distancing itself from the moment of J. M. Coetzee's inspiration with Costello, the character, the sentence he is sentenced to speak.

This is not to say, though, that this novel is simply about its inability to be about what it seeks to be about. In foregrounding its exile from its origin and thereby acknowledging its inability to present love, *Slow Man* exposes the ethical nature of the writer's aesthetic responsibility. Exactly because the medium and form of the novel are hostile to love, the inspired writer must make them accommodate it; she must open them out to that which they seek to exclude. Whether or not this is possible is quite simply beside the point. Under inspiration, the writer cannot but obey the ethical command to do so. Despite herself, then, she must render language hospitable to that to which it is hostile. Despite itself, the medium of the novel must be made hospitable. It is the writer's aesthetic obligation to make the work "reduce language's reduction of love" (Geertsema).

In fact, on closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that *Slow Man*'s self-conscious skepticism about its ability to accommodate love is, in

11. In his use of the Orpheus myth to allegorize just this aporia ("Orpheus' Gaze"), Blanchot suggests that the actual desire of the writer-as-Orpheus is not to reveal what revelation can only destroy but to see the invisible as invisible in the "*other* dark." Elsewhere, Blanchot frames this aporia as follows: "How can I recover it, how can I turn around and look at what exists *before*, if all my power consists of making it into what exists *after*?" ("Literature" 327). As I have noted, Levinas insists on the pastness of the Other. The self's exposure to the Other, that is, "the time of [self-sacrificing] responsibility for the other," is not recuperable by "an active ego": "[I]t is not possible that responsibility for another devolve from a *free* commitment, that is, a present; it exceeds every actual or represented present. It is thus in a time without beginning. Its anarchy cannot be understood as a simple return from present to prior present,... a time assemblable in a recollection of a representable representation" (51).

itself, the means through which Coetzee attempts to fulfill this ethico-aesthetic obligation. In having his novel suggest that it may be the disabling condition for unconditional hospitality, this writer seeks to open it to exactly this experience. It should here again be noted that, rather than presenting Paul Rayment's growth to love, Coetzee presents his novel's failure to present this development. He makes the novel's form signify not presence but a failure thereof and, in the process, indicate the limitlessness that its limits inevitably imply. While it may not have the ability to present love—may well be the very condition of impossibility for it—the novel thus does have the ability to gesture beyond itself, to gesture to that which is not just different from but more than, indeed infinitely other than, its form and medium. Through investing it with this capacity to point beyond its "givenness" and thereby, crucially, to distance itself from itself, Coetzee opens out the form of his novel not to its opposite but, as Derrida puts it in a discussion of language and hospitality, "to an other than itself that is no longer *its* other" (*Acts* 362).[12] In failing to name, invite, and hence control its visitor, the novel opens itself to the possibility of being invaded, possessed, and controlled by it. After all, its inability to master that which it seeks but fails to present precludes this novel from not only including this otherness in, but also excluding it from, its textual economy. If it is hospitable, then, the text is so despite itself. Despite itself, *Slow Man* holds itself open to, lets itself be haunted by, that which is other than itself.

My use of the word *haunted* is quite deliberate. If the text's hospitality consists of its inability either to include or to exclude the alterity with which it is concerned, it follows that the otherness in question is spectral, neither present nor absent.[13] In failing to present it, *Slow Man* is haunted by its writer's gift of self. Its hospitality is an effect of its inspiration and possession by, obsession with, that which

12. Theodor Adorno uses the word "givenness" in his reworking of the Benjaminian notion of the artwork's "aura" (67). For Adorno, aura is that which enables the artwork to gesture beyond itself and thereby to distance itself from itself and the "administered world." Related to the "transcendent tendency in any work of art," aura is the "connection" of the artwork's "moments in so far as they point beyond themselves, singly and together. It is this dimension of art...which represents the side in works of art that goes beyond reification and factual description. It is something fleeting and elusive" (386).

13. See Derrida's use of the word *haunt* in a related context in *Acts of Religion* (364).

it is unable to possess, over which it cannot exert conceptual control. If anything, these inferences are even clearer in *Age of Iron*, in Mrs. Curren's description of her letter to her daughter, its projected recipient: "These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on" (120). Mrs. Curren's words, which echo those of Christ to his disciples at the Last Supper, liken the text to the Eucharist, the archetypal self-sacrificing gift of love, which is also a gift of death.[14] In so doing, they figure the text as the Host that hosts the writer's ghost.

As Mrs. Curren's words indicate, this transubstantiation, in the course of which the writer as host becomes guest and ghost, has a direct effect on the reader, the unwitting recipient of the spectral gift of self. In *Slow Man*, Coetzee thematizes just this issue by depicting the novel as a site of the dead, an underworld of sorts which, in turn, figures reading as a descent into the realm of the dead. The association of the novel with the abode of the dead is already evident in the suggestion that the accident with which the novel opens kills Paul Rayment. Once he recovers his senses in the hospital, he reflects on "the lurking question of what exactly it was that happened on Magill Road to blast him into this dead place" (4). The use of the word *blast* here is not incidental, as is emphasized by the fact that the motorist responsible for the accident, described as "the angel of death" (122), bears the name "Blight," which in fact means "blast" ("Blight"). By implication, Paul Rayment's "fall" is a katabasis, a blowing downward ("Katabasis"), a descent into the underworld. Rayment himself reflects on having, Alice-like, "tumble[d] down a dark hole" (122), and Elizabeth Costello, in discussing the accident with him, refers to the "life you were about to depart" and describes Magill Road as "the very portal to the abode of the dead" (83). Finally, it is not only the hospital that is described as a place of the dead, "a cocoon of dead air" (3): Rayment's apartment is a "funeral parlour" (227), and Adelaide a "graveyard" (231). Given this association of the novel's

14. Two of the roots of the word *Eucharist* are *kharizesthai*, meaning "to offer graciously," and *kharis*, meaning "grace" ("Eucharist"). In Coetzee's secular ethic, grace derives from a sacrifice of self.

settings with death, it is not surprising that Rayment should refer to himself as being "caught in limbo" (112). Like Costello (120, 160), Rayment, in a further extension of the air motif, is depicted as a spirit, *"A figure without substance, ghostly, beyond anger and desire"* (224). Both he and Costello, then, are "blank," "colourless" and "featureless," lacking in form and substance (120, 160).

In depicting itself as a place of the dead, *Slow Man* describes reading not only as a descent into the underworld but also as an attempt to raise the dead. By imaging its reading as a katabasis, this text, in fact, implies that *it* must inspire the reader to invest it—the host of the writer's spectral gift of self—with form and substance. The novel must inspire the reader to animate it. This much is intimated by two of the novel's images of reading. In the first, Paul Rayment encounters one of Elizabeth Costello's novels, appropriately entitled *The Fiery Furnace* (119), and after reading a couple of passages, snaps the book shut, reflecting that "He is not going to expose himself to any more of the colorless, odorless, inert, and depressive gas given off by its pages" (120). Immediately thereafter, he reads a passage from Costello's notebook describing a woman davening over a dying body, that is, *"Rocking stiffly back and forth at the bedside, her hands over her ears, her eyes wide open, unblinking, as though afraid she might miss the moment when, like a spurt of gas, the soul will leave the body"* (121). These instances of the air motif serve to associate expiration with inspiration, spirit with ghost, and, through their common root, *gast,* ghost with guest ("Ghost"; "Guest").[15] Indeed, in German, Dutch, and Afrikaans, the word *gas* is also homonymously linked to *guest*.[16] Collectively, these

15. Coetzee's metaphorical vocabulary does not distinguish overtly between the expected "guest" and the unexpected "visitor."

16. I must thank Johan Geertsema for reminding me of Coetzee's discussion of the word *gas* in his essay on Gerrit Achterberg's "Ballade van de Gasfitter" ("Achterberg's" 73–75). Apart from reflecting on its homonyms, Coetzee examines this word's symbolic import in the poem. Especially insightful, in this regard, is his argument that the gas fitter is a figure of the poet, and that the gas, which "enters every home" as guest, symbolizes "the spirit, ghostly, overwhelmingly, coming upon us with fatal power, smelling of the void, tamed only by the *dichter*-priest" (73). Gas, and Coetzee reminds his reader that the word derives from the Greek "chaos," is infinity, the void. The writer, who mediates between its powers and the structural "needs of man" (73), is therefore—to again use Elizabeth Costello's description in *Elizabeth Costello*—a "secretary to the invisible" (199). My argument is that, should the reader be exposed to the invisible in his reading of the text, he too becomes its secretary.

associations allude not only to the possibility that the reader may be inspired by the text, but also to the nature of such inspiration. The suggestion is that what the reader is exposed to in reading is neither in nor outside of the novel. What may inspire the reader, then, is the trace of the absence of that which has inspired the text and which the latter, in failing to present it, also fails to keep out.

To read in the manner imaged in the novel is therefore to risk opening oneself to the guest, the ghost, that the text hosts despite itself, that it has been possessed by due to its inability to possess it. Were this to happen, the reader would, in turn, be possessed by that which possesses the text. Exactly this notion of reading as possession is invoked in *Age of Iron* in the dying Mrs. Curren's comparison of her letter to her daughter, who is to receive and read it only after her mother's death, to a moth, a comparison that alludes to the mythological representation of the soul as a butterfly emerging from a dying person's mouth:

> Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings: that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse: my soul readying itself for further flight....
>
> The moth is simply what will brush your cheek ever so lightly as you put down the last page of this letter, before it flutters off on its next journey. It is not my soul that will remain with you but the spirit of my soul, the breath, the stirring of the air about these words, the faintest of turbulence traced in the air by the ghostly passage of my pen over the paper your fingers now hold.
>
> (118–19)

To be inspired by the text is to be exposed to, indeed to be invaded by, "the colorless, odorless, inert, and depressive gas given off" by its "pages." While the reader under inspiration becomes the host of the text, it is only in having been taken hostage by it. The reader hosts the work through losing the ability to extend an invitation to it.

Differently put, the reader forfeits subjective volition through losing the ability to possess the novel conceptually, to integrate it into a priorly formed conceptual system. The text inspires the reader by exceeding the expectations and intentions that he brings to his encounter with it. This is to say that it inspires the reader by surprising him. Once again, the ghost metaphor intimates as much. In figuring inspiration as the novel's possession of the reader, it also implies that the reader, in being haunted by the text, is shocked, horrified, rendered aghast by it. To be inspired is to be *caught* unawares. Indeed, the word *surprise* derives in part from *prehendere*, "to catch" ("Surprise"; "Prehend"), as Coetzee intimates in the opening sentence of the novel: "The blow catches him from the right, sharp and surprising and painful" (1). The reader's inability to comprehend the text, to grasp it with his mind, enables it to surprise him.[17]

Unconditional hospitality is inspiration, surprise, which is to say an accident in which the reader, the host, "goes absent" (1). In being haunted by the text, the reader is possessed, unhomed, and—as the etymology of the word *haunt* connotes—becomes a *haimaz*, a home, for this visitor ("Haunt"). The words "goes absent" come from the opening passage of the novel, which describes Paul Rayment's accident. As I have previously indicated, this opening scene may be read as an allegory of writerly inspiration. It can, of course, also be read not so much as an allegory of the reader's inspiration by the novel, but as the event thereof, the pre-reflective moment in which the reader is seized and possessed by the words on the page and thereby dispossessed of self. In other words, the scene seeks to be the moment in which reading loses its status as a willed action and becomes an event.[18]

As the reader reads the novel's opening pages, that is, she reads what may be happening in the very moment of reading the novel's opening pages. She reads of the possibility of "going absent" in

17. Ironically, in referring to the accident, Paul Rayment asks Elizabeth Costello the following questions: "Am I alive or am I dead? Did something happen to me on Magill Road that I have failed to grasp?" (233). This irony inevitably extends to the reader's response to the novel's play with the etymology of words such as *surprise*, *grasp*, *comprehend*, and, indeed, *ghost*, *guest*, and *gas*. While Coetzee invites the reader to trace such etymologies and thereby establish the novel's coherence, the etymologies concerned all signify the text's desire to interrupt precisely this interpretive procedure, to slip the reader's conceptual grasp. Johan Geertsema explains as follows the "paradoxical effect" of Coetzee's use of etymology, particularly false etymology, in *Age of Iron* and *Slow Man*: "[Such etymologies] serve to connect, thread together and render coherent the web of the text. But such rendering coherent is of course precisely what the text wishes to interrupt even as it encourages/demands it."

18. My discussion again alludes to Attridge's perceptive accounts of literature in the event. For Attridge, reading is not simply an intentional, willed act, but something that happens to the subject that reads—an event (*J. M. Coetzee* 9–12; *Singularity* 59, 105).

reading, of being inspired by Paul Rayment's expiration, his "last word" (263), his last gasp, his giving up of the ghost. For in such a reading, it is the novel that is a hospital, a "dead place," a "cocoon of dead air" (3). To apply Elizabeth Costello's description of Magill Road, the novel's opening setting, to the text as a whole, the novel, in the event of the accident of inspiration, becomes "the very portal to the abode of the dead" (83). Its words, like air, are "colorless, odorless, inert" (120). To read them is to read of being inspired by them to animate the writer's spirit by which they are haunted. The reader's task is to make flesh the word, to breathe life into it. In this regard, Mrs. Curren's aforementioned words to her daughter, the internal reader in *Age of Iron*, once again apply to the reader of *Slow Man*: "These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on" (120).

Under inspiration, then, the reader is faced with exactly the responsibility that confronts the writer, that is, to animate the word, to make of language a home for the other. As in the case of writerly responsibility, the issue at stake here is not whether or not this task can be accomplished but the fact that, in the event of being inspired by the text, the reader is charged with the responsibility for doing so. The reader undertakes this task not because she thinks that it is possible to complete it, but because she has no say in the matter. In fact, rather than undertake it, she is assigned it: reading is not an action open to a subject in a world of possibility but an event in which the reader, as the character Dostoevsky puts it, gives herself up (*Master* 47). She thus cannot but care generously, which is to say selflessly.

It is tempting to conclude that the reader's inspiration is the *telos* toward which the novel progresses, and that, should it attain this goal, it will have secured, in the event of its own reading, a reenactment of the unconditional hospitality that produced it, but which it is unable to thematize. While being unable to represent such generous care, *Slow Man* will have secured a performance thereof in its reception. Such a conclusion would, however, overlook the ateleological dimension of the aesthetic and ethical task concerned. It would overlook the fact, that is, that the reader's task is not a finite *task* but an infinite *responsibility*. The novel charges the reader with the responsibility of presenting what Costello has failed to present, what Rayment has failed to present, and, indeed, what Coetzee has failed to present due to the insufficiency of language. What the reader must present is not just what language cannot present, but that which it is unable to exclude from the text's economy. Precisely because it cannot be excluded, the unpresentable ceaselessly demands to be included, to come into being. The reader is accordingly charged with a responsibility that cannot be discharged, and which therefore continues once she lays down the book. In terms of Coetzee's metaphorical vocabulary, the reader's actions in the world will continue to be haunted by the demand of the unpresentable even after she has finished reading the novel. Her actions in the present will be informed, indeed mediated, by the moment, indeed instant, of her inspiration, the immemorial event of her self-sacrificing generosity.

The reader thus affected will become a "secretary of the invisible" (*Elizabeth Costello* 199). Her relations in the present in the realm of conditional hospitality will be inspired by, and consequently inflected with, the ethic of absolute hospitality. What Levinas says of the effect on society of the self's encounter with the otherness of the human Other is true of these relations: that is, they will be conducted "in the trace of transcendence, in illeity" (158); they will be interrupted by unconditional care's insistence on coming into being. Coetzee's imagery in not only *Slow Man* but also *Foe* and *Age of Iron* articulates this ethic of reading. In *Slow Man*, the imagery of following indicates the novel's desire to pursue and preside over the reader's worldly actions in the same way that Elizabeth Costello follows Paul Rayment and he, "haunted by the idea of doing good" (155), follows the Jokić family. This imagery is closely related to Mrs. Curren's depiction of her letter as a Fury in *Age of Iron* (127–28, 178): the letter, and by extension the novel, must relentlessly pursue its reader, imaged here as a perverter of respectful relations.

What is at stake in *Slow Man*'s bid to affect the reader is therefore an attempt to extend the scope of ethical concern to everyone irrespective of identity. If the reader is moved to responsibility in the course of his singular engagement with the novel, he will no longer be in a position to choose freely and autonomously his other commitments, to decide independently to what or whom he will extend care and concern. His relationships will no longer be determined solely by the calculus of invitation and, accordingly, the kind of differential exclusion that engenders ethical indifference.

If the novel's ethic of hospitality is to work, the pre-reflective experience of reading must thus affect the reader's conscious and reflective life. The moment of reading must be an *Augenblick,* a blink of the eye, in which the reader's intentional consciousness is interrupted by that which it not only fails to include but also to exclude. In other words, Susan Barton's experience with Cruso on the island in *Foe* is exactly the effect that *Slow Man* wishes to have on its reader: "We yield to a stranger's embrace or give ourselves to the waves; for the blink of an eyelid our vigilance relaxes; we are asleep; and when we awake, we have lost the direction of our lives" (*Foe* 30). Elsewhere, Barton reflects on the way in which such ecstatic experiences remain with one as an "after-memory" (104). It is because she can "summon back nothing distinct" that the "after-memory" remains with her and ceaselessly insists on being remembered. In aspiring to make of the reading experience an *Augenblick, Slow Man* seeks to remain with and in the reader as an insubstantial "after-memory" which cannot be, and so demands to be, "summoned" back. Should the novel have this effect on the reader, it will have changed her, freed her from her self-entrapment. Ultimately, the *Bildung* that is really at issue in this novel is not that of Paul Rayment but of the reader. *Slow Man* seeks to save the reader. In terms of the Levinasian notion of an "inspiration that is already expiration" (182), it endeavors to free the reader "by breathing from closure in oneself" (180).

Coetzee's bid to make of the reading of his novel an attentional event is, of course, quite paradoxical. After all, this endeavor blurs the boundaries between host and visitor: the novel, which hosts the writer's spectral gift of self, wishes to possess the reader, to make of him a host and of itself his visitor. The text, that is, tries to control what cannot be controlled: it must induce an accidental reading which, were it to happen, could not be an accident. In order to do this, it must enact an opening for the reader and so await his arrival. As aspirant visitor, it must await the arrival of the reader as host. In doing so, it must actively prevent this host from inviting it, surprise him, and thereby ensure that it will be received with unconditional hospitality.

In the process of contriving such a reception, the novel cannot but await, and therefore invite, a certain kind of reader. It expects a reading that will surprise it and so enable it to enact what it cannot represent. That is, it intends an attentional reading. In the process, it paradoxically awaits that which, were it to come, would do so despite its intentions and against its expectations. Indeed, *Slow Man* announces its expectation of the unexpected in the passage in which the woman davens over the dying body. While I have previously discussed this passage as an image of reading, the shifting roles of host and visitor in the novel require, indeed exact, additional readings, including one in which the scene allegorizes the paradox of expecting the unexpected.[19] In the excerpt from Elizabeth Costello's notebook, the woman who waits for a "spurt of gas" to leave the body on the bed does so with "hands over her ears, her eyes wide open, unblinking" (121). The woman awaits what Levinas calls "invisible air" (180); she awaits that which, were it to come, would come unseen, unexpectedly, and unbeknownst to her. She wishes to see that which can only come in an *Augenblick*.

The novel expects "invisible air" by aspiring to be "invisible air," to be that which affects a reader who, were she to be affected, would be so not only despite herself, but also despite the novel's intentions. *Slow Man* is thus self-consciously aware that it awaits a reader who is wholly other and to whose arrival, should it transpire, it will be quite oblivious. The text is aware, that is, that the time of awaiting is without term, that to all intents and purposes the attentional reader is always yet to come. By extension, the novel knows that the visitation of the host/visitor it awaits exceeds the time of arrival and departure, that the moment of arrival is always deferred because the reader it awaits is always more than it expects.

The apparent futility of this endeavor is, however, itself a sign of the fact that awaiting is an intention that escapes the writer's intention. The novel's awaiting of and attempt to inspire and affect

19. For an insightful discussion of Coetzee's staging of the paradox of expecting the unexpected in *The Master of Petersburg*, see Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee* 121–24.

the reader is itself an effect of Coetzee's inspiration. Indeed, the text's self-conscious obsession with its own reading is a trace of the pastness of the attentional moment of this inspiration. *Slow Man* is haunted by the unconditional hospitality through which it has come into being but of which it is merely a trace. In other words, its desire to possess the reader, to assert control over the reader's reading of the novel, is beyond its control. Differently put, its attempt to assert control is an effect of a loss of control. In fact, it is the necessary and inevitable, because wholly involuntary, aesthetic response to the ethical imperative to make of language a home for the other.

Significantly, too, in this regard, the novel's endeavor to possess the reader must be seen in the context of its depiction of itself as the writer's spectral gift of self. In terms of the ethic and aesthetic of hospitality, it follows from this depiction that the text is a response to the writer's inspiration and possession by the otherness of the recipient of his gift. He gives himself to the reader in being taken hostage by her. However, if this gift is to be received by the reader, it must surprise her. In order to give himself to the reader, Coetzee must therefore possess her. The novel's attempt to possess and control the reader is thus itself a function of the recipient's possession of the giver of the gift.

It follows that *Slow Man* is a trace of Coetzee's inspiration by the otherness of the reader whom it seeks to inspire. It is itself an effect of its writer's inspiration by that which it awaits to inspire and to be animated by. To use the term that Mrs. Curren applies to the effect that Vercueil's otherness has had on her and the effect that, she suspects, her otherness has had on him, the novel awaits a "mutual election" (*Age of Iron* 179), a notion that relies on, even as it dismantles, the opposition between host and visitor.

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